



Moral Contempt and Moral Faith in Civic Life

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This is a paper about a vice and a related virtue, both involving the attitudes we take up toward other people. The vice is moral contempt and the virtue is moral faith. Moral contempt, as I am understanding it, is the attitude that someone is not a worthy participant in the moral community. To have moral contempt toward a person is to treat that person as lacking standing to participate in moral and political life in virtue of some reprehensible view, action, or character trait. Moral faith, by contrast, is a stance from which we regard the members of our community as though they are morally better versions of themselves and engage with them on those terms.

In this paper, I give an account of moral contempt that aims to explain both why it is a vice and also why it is especially damaging to moral and political communities. I then argue that the remedy for moral contempt is the cultivation of the virtue of moral faith in its place.

Although I think that contempt is a vice (and faith a virtue) in both private and public realms, I will focus primarily on their expression in the context of civic life. Contempt is particularly destructive in public democratic discourse because it attacks the premise of moral equality on which such discourse is based. Moral faith, I argue, is required as a precondition of having a moral community in which effective political discourse is possible.

Neither moral contempt for people nor moral faith in them standardly appear on lists of vices and virtues. Indeed, it may appear as though contempt is at least sometimes a morally good thing and faith sometimes a morally troubling thing, in which case contempt is not always a vice and faith not always a virtue. Some people seem to deserve contempt, such as those who have done morally reprehensible actions for which they feel no remorse or hold morally despicable

views. And faith in the basic moral decency of all human beings might reasonably be thought naïve and perhaps even dangerous in certain circumstances. In that sense, my argument faces somewhat of an uphill climb against both widely held intuitions and also, of course, widespread practice. The frequency with which contempt appears in moral and political discourse contributes to its perceived legitimacy.

But contempt, I will argue, is a morally destructive attitude. It has negative effects on the person who harbors it, the person at whom it is targeted, and the larger moral and political community. Sustaining a productive and respectful civic culture is impossible in the presence of widespread contempt. Alas, we can easily slide into contemptuous attitudes and behaviors, often without being fully aware of it. The subtlety of contempt contributes to its danger. In order to fend off that danger, we must do our best to cultivate its opposite, the virtue of moral faith in our fellow human beings.

My account of moral contempt as a vice and moral faith as a virtue will be largely Kantian. This approach may seem surprising to people accustomed to thinking of Kant as a purveyor of moral principles rather than moral virtues. Although Kant does have a conception of virtue, it tends to be overshadowed by better known and more widely discussed conceptions, notably Aristotle's. This is understandable, given the richness of the Aristotelian picture and the comparative thinness of the corresponding Kantian picture. For Kant, virtue is essentially strength in living up to the demands of the moral law. While we may be happy to agree that this is a morally important feature of a person, we may also think that it is insufficient as an account of virtue. But there is more to Kantian virtue than meets the eye. Kant had distinctive and useful insights into human nature and the challenges it poses, both to the cultivation of our characters and also to our capacity to engage with others in the public sphere. Indeed, a Kantian picture of

virtue is particularly useful for making sense of contemporary political discourse, where concepts like respect and dignity are often at the forefront. Although it is possible to layer these concepts onto an Aristotelian framework, the result can be a bit awkward. It makes sense, then, to see how a Kantian picture of virtue might illuminate dimensions of public virtue and vice.

This is especially true in a discussion of contempt, about which Kant had a great deal to say.¹ He had less to say about what I am calling moral faith. This is in part because, for reasons I will explain in a moment, he was more concerned with the need to avoid vices than the need to cultivate virtues. Kant saw certain human proclivities and tendencies as serious threats to our ability to create and sustain moral and political community. He thus tended to focus on the development of defensive weapons against the potential evils lurking in human nature, rather than on the perfection of that nature. The Kantian path to virtue begins with the avoidance of vice.

For those not deeply familiar with the Kantian moral framework, let me spend just a few minutes providing some necessary background for making sense of his moral concerns about contempt. The categorical imperative, best known from Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, has multiple formulations (anywhere between three and five, depending on how one counts). The requirement that I test my maxims of actions by running them through the famous universalization process ensures their logical coherence, but more importantly, it expresses my acknowledgement of my membership in a moral community. In this moral community, all rational agents have equal moral standing as ends in themselves, in possession of dignity and absolute value. When I commit to abiding by the categorical imperative, I am taking a kind of

¹For more on Kant on contempt, see Thomas Hill, "Must Respect Be Earned?" in *Respect, Pluralism, and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 87-118; Jeanine Grenberg, *Kant and the Ethics of Humility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Krista Thomason, "Shame and Contempt in Kant's Moral Theory" *Kantian Review* 18, no. 2 (2013): 221-240.

pledge to regard myself and others as members of this moral community, which Kant calls the kingdom of ends. John Rawls famously deployed the concept of a kingdom of ends in constructing his account of justice, and the ideal of a kingdom of ends is often simply associated with Rawlsian political theory.

But Kant also had a conception of what he calls the ethical commonwealth, or what we might think of as an idealized moral community that is not identical to the political community. He divides the *Metaphysics of Morals* into the *Doctrine of Right* and the *Doctrine of Virtue*, the former corresponding to the political realm and the latter to the ethical realm. Kantian juridical duties are duties that can properly be coerced by the state and so belong to the political realm. Kantian ethical duties, by contrast, are duties that we owe to ourselves and to each other in virtue of our common membership in the ethical commonwealth. They lie outside the authority of the state, but they are duties all the same. Crucially, they govern our behavior in the public sphere as well as the private sphere. The ethical commonwealth, in some sense, stretches over the political commonwealth, adding a moral layer to it and extending it beyond the proper boundaries of the state.

Kant believed it to be our duty to do everything within our power to bring our actual selves and communities closer to the moral ideal represented in the ethical commonwealth.² Insofar as our collective progression toward the ethical commonwealth is in my individual hands, I have an obligation to contribute to it and perhaps more pressingly, to avoid undermining that progress. As Kant saw it, the biggest obstacle we face in our efforts to make the ethical commonwealth a reality lies in our natural propensities toward self-love and self-conceit. The

²For excellent discussions of the importance of moral community in Kantian ethics, see Kyla Ebels-Duggan "Moral Community: Escaping the Ethical State of Nature." *Philosophers' Imprint* 9, no. 8 (August 2009): 1-19 and Kate Moran, *Community and Moral Progress in Kant's Moral Philosophy* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2012).

former is about our tendency to act on maxims favoring our own inclinations and interests, and the latter is about our desire to feel superior to others. For the most part, we know what morality requires of us. The challenge lies in getting ourselves to *do* what it requires, and that means overcoming the natural propensities that point us in the opposite direction. It is, Kant thinks, a major struggle, one that requires constant vigilance against the vices arising out of self-love and self-conceit.

The difficulty of maintaining our collective commitment to the ideal of the ethical commonwealth is a central reason why Kant is so concerned about contempt, particularly in public life. Although it is a vice of individual human beings, it has a pernicious effect on the moral community insofar as it impedes our efforts to bring about the ideal represented in the ethical commonwealth. On Kant's view, expression of contempt toward someone violates a duty of respect that we owe to that person. But there is much more to his concern about contempt than this. Contempt, he thinks, empowers our natural propensity to self-conceit. It encourages us to feel superior to other people, something we are already inclined to do in virtue of the pleasure it brings us. Moreover, by painting a dark picture of human beings, contempt fosters a more general attitude toward humanity that Kant thinks undermines our commitment to the ethical commonwealth. Contempt encourages misanthropy and cynicism toward our fellow rational beings, making it much harder to cultivate morally necessary attitudes of respect and love for them. Contempt makes us worse, as individuals and as communities. This is why it makes sense to think of it as a vice, and not simply as a duty not to perform particular contemptuous actions.

And indeed, this appears to be how Kant himself thought about contempt.³ Although his primary discussion of it is embedded within a more general discussion of what duties we have to

³Thomason argues that we can make sense of the various passages where Kant seems to defend contempt by thinking of contempt as directed at a false persona.

others in virtue of the respect we owe to them, Kant frames most of that discussion in terms of vices that must be avoided if we are to fulfill those duties. Kant does not specifically call contempt a vice, but he treats it like one and his discussion of it is immediately followed by a section of three related attitudes that he does call vices—arrogance, defamation, and ridicule. It is not easy to sort out how Kant thinks these should be categorized, and I am not going to worry about the best textual analysis here. In my view, contempt, arrogance, defamation, and ridicule are different facets of the same moral problem. Regardless of whether Kant actually labeled contempt a vice, it makes sense within his broader moral framework to conceptualize it that way.

To see how we might think about contempt as a Kantian vice, it will nevertheless help to begin, as Kant does, with pinpointing what is wrong with particular actions that express contempt:

To be contemptuous of others, that is, to deny them the respect owed to human beings in general, is in every case contrary to duty; for they are human beings. At times one cannot, it is true, help inwardly looking down on some in comparison with others; but the outward manifestation of this is, nevertheless, an offense....I cannot deny all respect to even a vicious man as a human being; I cannot withdraw at least the respect that belongs to him in his quality as a human being, even though by his deeds he makes himself unworthy of it.⁴

This passage makes clear that for Kant, the fundamental moral problem with contempt is that it reflects an attitude that its target is not worthy of the moral status of being an end, or a member of the moral community. He goes on to argue that certain judicial punishments, such as drawing and quartering, are incompatible with this respect that belongs to even the most hardened criminals as rational beings. Employing a useful distinction from Steven Darwall, we might describe Kant's position this way: the criminal always warrants recognition respect, even when

⁴ DV 463. This and all subsequent citations of the *Doctrine of Virtue* are from the *Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and refer to the Prussian Academy page numbers.

he has forfeited his claim to appraisal respect.⁵ We may regard him as a poor excuse for a human being, but we may not stop regarding him as a human being. Even if we are inclined to feel that way (and Kant clearly has sympathy for those who do), we are duty-bound not to express the contempt or support actions that treat even the worst criminals in a contemptuous way.

On this interpretation of contempt, it is a fundamentally dehumanizing attitude. In Strawsonian terms, we might say that contempt treats a person as an object in the world, rather than a participant in it.⁶ Some accounts of contempt interpret it as a Strawsonian reactive attitude, in which case it is a response to another person from within the participant stance.⁷ But if contempt is a reactive attitude, it is a strange one. For one thing, it is globalist, meaning that it is directed at the entire person, rather than a particular action or character trait of a person. Contempt is also generally accompanied by aversive behavior. We withdraw from or avoid the object of our contempt. These two features, I think, suggest that contempt is not in fact properly understood as something that we do within the participant stance. It is not just that we withdraw from the presence of the target; we withdraw from the target as a fellow member of our moral and political community. Contempt understood this way is a refusal to engage with a person from within the participant stance. It is not a response to a person as a fellow member of the moral community; it is an attempt to place the target outside of that community.⁸

Contempt, as Kant recognizes, takes many forms. In another passage in the same section—one that should probably get more attention from philosophy professors!—Kant turns

⁵ Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect" *Ethics* 88, no. 1 (October 1977): 36-49.

⁶ P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment" *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 1-25.

⁷ See Michelle Mason, "Contempt as a Moral Attitude," *Ethics* 113 (January 2003): 234–272 and Macalester Bell, *Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially Chapters 5. Also see Bell, "A Woman's Scorn: Toward a Feminist Defense of Contempt as a Moral Emotion" *Hypatia* 20, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 80-93.

⁸ I argue for this view in more detail in two unpublished papers, "What's Wrong with Contempt" and "The Moral Boundaries of Mockery." The outlines of it can also be found in a column I wrote for the New York Times *Stone* column. ("Our New Age of Contempt" *New York Times*, January 23, 2017).

his focus to contempt for people making what might seem like egregious mistakes in reasoning. Here the duty to avoid contempt, expressed primarily in negative terms above, takes on some more active dimensions:

On this is based a duty to respect a human being even in the logical use of his reason, a duty not to censure his errors by calling them absurdities, poor judgment, and so forth, but rather to suppose that his judgment must yet contain some truth and to seek this out, uncovering, at the same time, the deceptive illusion (the subjective ground that determined his judgment which, by an oversight, he took for objective), and so, by explaining to him the possibility of his having erred, to preserve his respect for his own understanding. For if, by using such expressions, one denies any understanding to someone who opposes one in a certain judgment, how does one want to bring him to understand that he has erred?⁹

The duty to avoid contempt in this context requires not just that we avoid taunting those making the mistakes, but that we make an effort to find what it is true, or at least, to work from the presupposition that the one in error was seeking truth and that he believed himself to have found it. This, obviously, does not imply that we have to let errors stand. Quite the contrary, Kant thought we have a duty to correct errors, at least within the context of friendship. But it is imperative that we do so in a way that, as Kant says, enables the one in error to preserve his self-respect, specifically his respect for his rational capacities. We have to work from the presumption that all parties to the conversation are rational beings, capable of using understanding in the pursuit of truth. It is a moral stance, something we owe to others in virtue of their status as fellow members of the kingdom of ends, not something that people earn through a track record of good reasoning.

Kant uses the same point to argue against contempt in the censuring of vice in other people, which must be done in a way compatible with recognition respect for them:

The same thing applies to the censure of vice, which must never break out into complete contempt and denial of any moral worth to a vicious human being; for on this supposition

⁹ DV 463

he could never be improved, and this is not consistent with the idea of a human being, who as such (as a moral being) can never lose entirely his predisposition to the good.¹⁰

This passage highlights the primary reason why Kant thinks that contempt for vicious people is a violation of a duty of respect for them. It supposes that they are incapable of improving, and that, Kant thinks, is a supposition that we are never entitled to make about our fellow human beings.

But why not? Why is the stance of regarding seemingly incorrigibly evil people with contempt ruled out, and why must we adopt the stance of regarding them as capable of improvement? Interestingly, Kant does not exactly take up this question in terms of what we owe to individual rational beings. He is more concerned with the effects of contempt on the person who adopts it as a moral attitude and on its impact on the broader moral community. Certainly he thinks that we owe it to other people not to treat them with contempt, regardless of what they have done. The reasons, however, have as much to do with the person harboring contempt and the audience for that contempt as with the person who is the target of the contempt. Contempt is bad for the target, but it is also bad for the rest of us.

In the Kantian moral framework, there are three general types of duties—duties we owe to ourselves, duties we owe to other rational agents, and duties to humanity as such. The last of these is a somewhat puzzling category, but it does a great deal of work in certain sections of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, including the one under discussion. Roughly, our duties to humanity as such are duties to the moral community understood as a whole. They are, as we might say, duties to help us all keep the ethical commonwealth in view and move our communities ever closer toward it. On Kant's view, contempt and related vices have pernicious effects on our collective ability to maintain our grip on the moral ideal represented in the commonwealth. Consider what

¹⁰ DV 463-464.

he says about the vice he calls defamation, which is essentially the vice of taking pleasure in hearing and spreading nasty gossip about people:

By defamation...I mean only the immediate inclination, with no particular aim in view, to bring into the open something prejudicial to respect for others. This is contrary to the respect owed to humanity as such; for every scandal given weakens that respect, on which the impulse to the morally good rests, and as far as possible makes people skeptical about it. The intentional spreading of something that detracts from another's honor—even if it is not a matter of public justice, and even if what is said is true—diminishes respect for humanity as such, so as finally to cast a shadow of worthlessness over our race itself, making misanthropy (shying away from human beings) or contempt the prevalent cast of mind, or to dull one's moral feeling by repeatedly exposing one to the sight of such things and accustoming one to it.¹¹

What is striking about this passage is the fact that Kant's concern is not with how defamation violates a duty of respect to the target, although presumably it does. Rather, he is concerned with the effects of defamation on those who participate in it. By “dulling the moral feeling” in us and “casting a shadow of worthlessness” over humanity, defamation makes it more difficult for us to adopt the moral attitudes necessary to bring about the ethical commonwealth. Defamation and contempt encourage us to despise and disparage our fellow human beings.

It is this aspect of Kant's account of contempt that, I think, makes it plausible to consider it a vice. Although it is clear that Kant thinks we have a duty not to engage in particular actions that express contempt, he is also concerned with it as an underlying moral attitude. Contempt feeds our self-conceit, allowing us to believe (falsely) in our relative superiority to other people. It provides us with an excuse to dismiss and diminish other people and their ends. It fosters a cynical view of human nature and the possibility of human progress. Although Kant is certainly concerned with the particular actions that express contempt toward other people, he is just as concerned with its more general effects on our dispositions and commitments. In order to fulfill

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our moral obligations to ourselves, to each other, and to the moral community, we have to cultivate our capacities to feel respect and love for our human beings. On Kant's view, our natural propensities toward self-conceit and self-love make this difficult. We find it hard not to despise people, but we are required to regard them with respect and love. Insofar as contempt encourages us to despise our fellow human beings, it is a vice. The spread of contempt is like the spread of a dangerous disease. The more contempt that surrounds us, the harder it is for us to avoid taking up the dark picture of humanity that it presents. Widespread contempt is a life-threatening illness for a moral community.

So to summarize, on Kant's view, contempt has destructive effects on the individual who harbors it, on the person who is targeted by it, and the broader ethical community. It makes us worse by exacerbating our natural tendencies toward self-conceit. It violates a duty of respect to its target by treating that person as being unworthy of membership in the moral community. On Kant's view, this is always wrong. It is not possible for anyone to waive or forfeit her right to basic membership in the moral community, regardless of what she has done. We owe it to people to treat them in a way consistent with this status, even if they are not currently behaving in a way consistent with it. We owe them this not just as individuals, but as representatives of the ethical commonwealth. To deny, disparage, or undermine the dignity of one member of the commonwealth is to deny, disparage, and undermine the dignity of all members. This is how contempt threatens the very foundations of moral community. It takes our already fragile commitment to the ethical commonwealth and renders it more fragile by making it more difficult to see other human beings as fellow members of that commonwealth.

It is this pernicious effect on the broader moral community that makes contempt so destructive in civic life. In the United States, at least, the current political culture is marked by

widespread contempt on all sides of the political spectrum. This is hardly a new phenomenon, but it is worth seeing how Kant's concerns about contempt might apply to political discourse in a time of increasing division and alienation, along with changes in the vehicles through which we conduct political discussions. It is often reported that we are increasingly unlikely to engage in political discussion with people who disagree with us, preferring instead to get political news from partisan sources and have political conversations with like-minded people. Social media gives us little incentive to rein in contempt for our political adversaries, and plenty of incentive to express it. In such circumstances, it is easy for contempt to go unchallenged and often even unrecognized. A political culture in which it seems normal to criticize one's political opponents by way of insults, mockery, and disparaging remarks about unrelated features of the person is a political culture with a contempt problem.

Democratic political discourse is, of course, premised on the idea that everyone has equal right to participate in it. Contempt, as I have articulated it, undermines that premise. It does so by expressing the attitude that certain people lack standing to participate in that discourse, either because of who they are or what they have done. When that attitude is given widespread uptake, it has the potential to do serious damage to political discourse. The unapologetic public expression of contempt serves to legitimize it, particularly among those already inclined to dismiss the targets of that contempt from the sphere in which political discussions take place.

To take an example, consider Donald Trump's contemptuous mockery of New York Times reporter Serge Kovalski, who has a physical disability. In the course of criticizing Kovalski's coverage of him, Trump imitated Kovalski's arm movements. Although Trump denied that he was deliberately mocking Kovalski's disability, he was widely understood, even among his supporters, to be doing just that. The mockery, of course, was intended to denigrate

Kovaleski in the eyes of his audience and to insinuate that Kovaleski need not be taken seriously as a reporter in virtue of his having a disability. It was a thinly veiled attempt to deny Kovaleski standing to participate in political discourse as an equal.

Contempt generally seeks uptake from an audience. It does not always succeed in getting the desired uptake, of course, since that depends on the audience's own dispositions. But when contempt does get uptake (and if Kant is right about our natural propensities toward self-conceit, it very often does), it legitimizes the attitude that the target need not be taken seriously. The effectiveness of contempt is dependent on its ability to get the audience to accept the denigration of the target and alter their subsequent attitudes and behaviors toward the target accordingly. Thus, the effectiveness of an attempt to discredit a reporter on the basis of a physical disability will depend on the audience's willingness to accept it as a discrediting feature of a person. And this in turn depends on the propensities of the audience and on the relative power relationships in that particular social situation.

Expressed contempt seeks to redefine its target in a way that diminishes the standing of the target. In this case, Trump sought to redefine Kovaleski as an object of ridicule or amusement, rather than as a serious critic writing for a well-established newspaper. He did so in a way that was likely to succeed with an audience harboring biases, acknowledged or not, against people with disabilities. It was, in other words, an attempted power play, capitalizing on features of his own situation that gave him social power in that situation as well as features of Kovaleski in virtue of which he is already vulnerable to social marginalization. The more effective contempt is at marginalizing someone, the more dangerous it is. It is effective when the social power relationships are such that the person expressing contempt is capable of relegating the target to the realm of objects and the target of the contempt is vulnerable to being relegated to

that realm. If the audience members accept the contemptuous portrayal of the target as warranted and adopt similar attitudes themselves, the target's relegation to the realm of objects will be more thoroughgoing and pervasive than it would be if the audience had rejected it. Social power, I suggest largely consists in being able to convince an audience to get uptake in a desired way. This means that contempt, when exercised by people who wield social power over an audience and when targeted at people who lack social power with respect to that audience, is especially effective.

In this case, Trump misjudged his audience, who largely rejected his attempt to marginalize Kovalski by way of his disability. But contempt is often far more subtle than it was in this incident, and it is also often received more sympathetically.¹² This is particularly true when the audience is already predisposed to dislike or want to feel superior to the target of the contempt, and when there is no one in the audience in a position to reject the contemptuous portrayal of the target or defend the target's right to be treated as an equal participant in the dialogue. Needless to say, when political discourse is conducted through talk shows, social media posts, and podcasts targeted almost exclusively toward people with similar political views, conditions are ripe for the growth and spread of contempt. It is easy for genuine political criticism to slide into contemptuous political criticism when the audience is receptive and there is no one in the audience to push back against the portrayal. And of course, this is not a problem specific to any one political group or orientation. As Kant knew perfectly well, it is a problem that all human beings face. We are all in danger of falling into the vice of contempt, no matter what our political beliefs or practices.

¹² Had Trump simply mocked Kovalski as a reporter for the *New York Times*, it might have received more effective uptake from his intended audience, which does not hold the *Times* in high regard.

At this point, it might be again be objected that there are people who deserve to be excluded from political discourse. Although it is obvious that no one deserves such exclusion in virtue of having a physical disability, we might think that political figures or others warrant exclusion in virtue of their morally objectionable actions and attitudes. Aristotle noted that anger is a virtue only when directed at the right people at the right time in the right amount and for the right reasons. We might think the same is true of contempt. Misplaced contempt is undoubtedly a vice, but why think that all contempt is misplaced? In particular, contempt that is directed at someone in virtue of morally reprehensible attitudes and actions may seem to an appropriate response to those attitudes and actions. This form of contempt is what I have been calling specifically moral contempt. It is contempt directed at someone in virtue of an atrocious moral record.

As we have seen, Kant explicitly rejects moral contempt on the grounds that it is not possible for anyone to forfeit her moral status as a member of the moral community. Because contempt denies its target that moral status, it is always a violation of a duty of respect for that person and to humanity more generally. Rationality itself always warrants respect from us, however badly people are misusing it. But there are reasons related to our duties to ourselves to avoid holding even moral miscreants in contempt. Kant's concerns about our tendencies toward self-conceit are made more pressing by what he also regarded as our common tendencies toward self-deception. It is easy to convince ourselves that we are making a legitimate and justified political criticism when in fact we are engaging in contempt. To put it slightly differently, the fact that we take pleasure in expressing contempt and seeing it expressed toward others hinders our ability to distinguish legitimate moral criticism from contemptuous dismissal.¹³ This is

¹³ I discuss Kant's concerns about morally troubling pleasure in an unpublished paper, "The Moral Boundaries of Mockery."

particularly important because contemptuous dismissal of political adversaries is often far more efficient and expedient than engagement with them. The temptation to deploy contempt is a strong one, and it is easy to delude ourselves about our motives and methods.

It is important to note that the injunction against contempt is not an injunction against moral outrage, or holding people responsible for what they have done. Indeed, one could argue that expressing outrage for morally objectionable attitudes and actions is a way of holding someone responsible for their conduct as a member of the moral community. There is a difference between regarding someone as a bad participant in the moral community and regarding him as unworthy of participation in it. Kantian respect is not compatible with the latter, but it permits and perhaps even requires the former. Self-respect demands that we call people out on their bad behavior toward us, and respect and concern for others entitles us to object when they are being poorly treated. We do not have to sit idly by while people do terrible things. We are permitted to intervene and to engage in moral criticism of the wrongdoers. But the criticism must be predicated on the assumption that the wrongdoer is capable of doing otherwise and can reasonably be expected to do otherwise in the future.

As we saw, Kant thinks that when correcting errors that others have committed, we have a duty to try to find the truth in what they have said. This is not because he believed that there is something true in everything everyone says. The duty, rather, is a kind of practical commitment to the ongoing rational capacities of the person we are trying to correct. It is an attitude we deliberately take up toward them, even in circumstances where we have some evidence to the contrary. We might describe it as a kind of normative stance that we assume when interacting with people. The stance demands that we regard people as capable of acting rationally and of living up to the moral demands represented in the ideal of the ethical commonwealth.

In his discussion of defamation, quoted above, Kant argues that we have a duty not to spread malicious gossip about people, even if it is founded in truth. The duty is based on our propensity to take untoward pleasure in such gossip and to regard it as confirming our own feelings of superiority over other. But Kant takes this duty a step further, saying that it is not simply a negative duty to avoid exposing the flaws of others this way, but also a positive duty to “throw the veil of love of man over their faults, not merely by softening our judgments but also by keeping these judgments to ourselves; for examples of respect that we give others can arouse their striving to deserve it.”¹⁴

The metaphor of throwing a veil of love or charity over the flaws of others is a striking one. Crucially, it does not seem to be quite the same as, say, giving someone the benefit of the doubt. We may in fact have no doubt that the person has the flaw in question. Kant seems to be suggesting that we should deliberately downplay the known flaws and failings of other people, at least in our expressed judgments about them. Those judgments are to be softened, modified, and perhaps even suppressed entirely. It is worth noting that Kant had a fairly strong anti-moralistic streak, despite his reputation for being a dour moral taskmaster. The motives of other people, he thinks, are largely opaque to us, and we are rarely unbiased when it comes to making comparative assessments. We don't really know what is going on in the hearts of other people, and we are already inclined to judge others harshly so as to satisfy our own tendencies toward self-conceit. But Kant adds a twist in this passage, which is that in throwing the veil of charity over the flaws and mistakes of other people, we can motivate them to behave better. In treating them as the versions of themselves that they should be striving to become, we may be able to inspire them to become those versions of themselves. In this way, the liberal use of the veil of

¹⁴ DV 466.

charity contributes to our overall progress toward the ethical commonwealth. It helps create an illusion of an idealized moral community and in so doing, brings us nearer to it.¹⁵

I described this Kantian duty to employ the veil of charity as a normative stance that we take up toward other people. In that sense, it is more like a deliberate commitment than a moral virtue, at least in the usual sense of that term. But there are reasons to think about this commitment as a kind of virtue, insofar as it represents an ongoing effort to view our fellow human beings in a charitable light. Specifically, moral faith is the stance that other people are capable of employing rationality well and hence, behaving in accordance with the demands of morality. Taking up this stance requires that we maintain an optimistic picture of human moral possibilities in our own minds and that we do our best to keep this picture at the forefront in our interactions with others. In order to avoid the cynicism and misanthropy that contempt fosters, we must deliberately take up the opposite stance toward our fellow human beings, one that presents them as possibly better than they actually are.

Ryan Preston-Roedder has given an account of a virtue he calls faith in humanity, which resembles what I have in mind by moral faith.¹⁶ He describes faith in humanity as a kind of optimism about people, a tendency to look for the good in them and their actions. Faith in humanity, as Preston-Roedder understands it, is comprised of a complex array of cognitive, affective, and volitional components. It requires us to adopt certain beliefs about people, take up certain affective stances toward them, and behave in certain ways toward them. In that broad sense, his account of faith in humanity fits with standards accounts of virtue. But the cognitive component of faith in humanity is importantly different from other virtues insofar as it permits

¹⁵ I present this picture in greater detail in a book manuscript, *Minding the Gap: Moral Ideals and Moral Improvement*, under contract with Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ Ryan Preston-Roedder, "Faith in Humanity" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 87, no. 3 (2013): 664-687.

(and indeed, may require) judgments that might be thought epistemically irrational. Preston-Roedder rightly, I think, takes this to be reason to rethink the norms of epistemic rationality in the moral life.¹⁷ Recent work on epistemic partiality shows this to be very complicated terrain, far too complicated to address fully here.¹⁸ So let me just focus on one aspect of the cognitive demands of faith in humanity which is that the relevant judgments need to be able to float free of the facts without floating entirely free of them. It is a form of deliberate ignorance that in the end, is not really ignorance at all. This strikes me as the right way to think about the cognitive aspect of virtuous faith, but it is certainly puzzling enough to warrant further comment.

It is built into the standard Aristotelian picture of virtue that it requires correct judgment. The virtue of modesty, somewhat notoriously, appears to run afoul of this requirement. As Julia Driver has pointed out, virtuous modesty seems to require ignorance about one's true merits and abilities, making it a rather peculiar virtue.¹⁹ A similar, although not exactly parallel problem arises in supererogation. People who perform supererogatory acts often believe such acts to be required of them, which of course they cannot be while remaining supererogatory. But here again it seems strange to think that truly virtuous people are ignorant of something, especially something that less virtuous people recognize.²⁰ Virtuous faith, if it actually requires ignorance of a person's true motives or proclivities, would run into difficulties of the same kind. It should not turn out to be the case that a person with virtuous faith in people is ignorant of what a less virtuous, more cynical person knows.

¹⁷ Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties of Faith," unpublished paper.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Sarah Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship," *Ethics* 116, no. 3 (April 2006): 498-524.

¹⁹ Julia Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance" *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (July 1989): 373-84. The literature on modesty contains a variety of creative attempts to resolve the problem, none of which strike me as entirely satisfactory.

²⁰ Of course this could be resolved by arguing that the supposedly supererogatory act is in fact required and so not supererogatory at all.

Preston-Roedder is careful to specify that faith in humanity does not require ignorance of this kind. Indeed, it is quite important to his picture that the person with faith in humanity is not oblivious to evidence. Faith is not naiveté, although perhaps that's the form that faith takes as a natural virtue in a young person. The person with virtuous faith has access to the same evidence that the cynic does, but she employs that evidence differently in her judgments. She is more willing to give people the benefit of the doubt, to look for evidence that confirms and supports the judgments that reflect her faith, and to try to come up with explanations for seemingly bad behavior that would cast it in a different light. If, for instance, she is cut off in traffic by a stranger, she may opt to attribute his rude behavior to imagined difficult circumstances in his day, rather than to selfishness or indifference. She looks for evidence of people's goodness, and where she lacks evidence, she draws inferences that point in that direction. None of this need be epistemically irresponsible in its own right. The more challenging cases arise when the person is faced with evidence that points in the opposite direction. What if we have excellent reason to think that someone is highly unlikely to come around to a morally defensible point of view, or repudiate his past morally reprehensible actions and attitudes? Do we still need to throw the veil of charity over his flaws?

This is particularly pressing when we think that the person in question is a genuine threat to others in the moral community. Throwing the veil of charity over the flaws of, say, a serial sexual harasser may violate other moral duties that we have, such as to seek justice for his victims and to prevent harm to others in the future. So if moral faith is to be a virtue, it cannot be a requirement that we always try to cast the person's actions in the best possible light. In many cases, what we need is the *true* moral light, and in such cases, it is crucial that we not let moral faith lapse into culpable whitewashing or concealment of evil.

In such cases, the virtue of moral faith may well resemble something that we might be more inclined to call hope. In her book, *How We Hope*, Adrienne Martin draws a distinction between having faith in people and having what she calls normative hope in them.²¹ Faith, for Martin, requires behaving in such a way that one expects the outcome to occur. If I have faith in my chronically forgetful friend, I will show up on time for my lunch with her. I do not act on the possibility that she will not be there; I make plans as though she will. As Martin puts it, “when I have faith in you, this is different than my hoping that you will be reliable, and the difference is largely that, in the case of hope and no faith, I may carry mad money.”²²

Moral faith as a virtue permits us to carry mad money when we have reason to doubt that the person will live up to our faith and when we have moral duties to protect ourselves and others from the risk of that outcome. But that is compatible with still hoping that we will be proved wrong and that the person will in fact come around and act as she should. In this sense, we might think of hoping as embodying an idealized stance toward another person. We plan for them to behave badly, but we hope that they will behave well.

The virtue of moral faith, as I am understanding it, directs us to take up a stance toward ourselves and others that is based not on what we are, but on what we could be. And what we could be is joint participants in the idealized moral community of the ethical commonwealth. The normative stance of moral faith is a stance that addresses other people as fellow members of that idealized moral community, committed to its success. When I have moral faith in someone, I regard him as someone who is capable of doing better or worse with respect to his moral obligations and hence, subject to appraisal in light of the shared moral standards of the

²¹ *How We Hope: A Moral Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). I should note that Preston-Roedder’s faith in humanity is closer to Martin’s normative hope than it is to what she is here calling faith.

²² Martin, p. 22

community to which we belong. I do not, for instance, regard him as a helpless product of his upbringing, even if I believe that it would have taken a miracle for him to have turned out differently. That would be to take what Strawson called the objective attitude toward him, rather than the participant reactive one.²³

As Strawson pointed out, it is often useful to be able to take up the objective attitude toward others, whether because we are observing them for purposes of an anthropology thesis or because we think it morally appropriate. If my friend, tired and stressed from caring for her seriously ill child, snaps at me when I do something I think will be helpful, it may be kinder to take on the objective attitude, and not hold her responsible for maintaining a polite tone of voice. In choosing not to hold her responsible for this, I waive my standing to resent her or adopt other reactive attitudes that might have otherwise been appropriate. But if we are to be committed to the ethical commonwealth, the objective attitude cannot be our default stance toward other people. We cannot build the ethical commonwealth except from within the participant stance. Even when people are failing to be good members of the moral community, they cannot fail to be members of it.

So moral faith as a virtue is compatible with calling people out on their moral failings, particularly when other moral duties require it. But the calling out must be done in a way that expresses our belief that the person can act otherwise and our hope that he will do otherwise in the future. This rules out taking pleasure in the exposure of misdeeds of our political adversaries, gratuitously mocking them for their behavior, and rejoicing in their political downfall. Moral faith allows us to be disappointed, disheartened, and outraged by morally bad behavior, but it warns us against being overly gleeful or triumphant when the behavior is exposed. On Kant's

²³ Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment."

view, moral faith is a difficult attitude to maintain. It requires that we not let our natural propensities toward self-conceit, or the genuine flaws and failings of others, to get in the way of regarding them as fellow members of the kingdom of ends. This is, as we have seen, why Kant thinks contempt is a vice. Contempt makes it harder for us to maintain our grip on this picture of humanity. Moral faith, by contrast, helps us keep it in focus. When we have moral faith in someone—even in cases where it is nothing more than a faint hope—we are holding them to their rightful position in the ethical commonwealth.

If we are lucky, they will take that position up. But even if they do not, the holding remains essential. It expresses our commitment to an ongoing relationship, one that we hope will progress in the direction of the moral ideal represented in the ethical community. Contempt, I suggest, is a rejection of that commitment and the hope it embodies. We might say that contempt is a form of giving up on people and hence, on the moral community itself. Moral faith in people is how we hold that community together.

Just as contempt does the most damage when it is expressed, so moral faith does the most good when it is expressed. This is especially true in political discourse. The explicit public presumption that our political adversaries are rational agents who take themselves to be operating on true beliefs is what protects civic life against the pernicious effects of contempt and allows us to proceed with the hope of moral progress. Insofar as that moral progress rests on the participation of everyone in the moral community, we must always regard our fellow human beings as participants in that community. This, I have argued, rules out contempt for them and requires moral faith in them, regardless of what they have done.

Let me close by saying that while it is true that the virtue of moral faith can be at odds with the truth about the actual world, it is not at odds with the truth about the moral world, at

least in this Kantian picture I have been defended. Even our most insufferable political adversaries are fellow members of our moral community. We may find it nearly impossible not to despise them, but our duty is to respect them and indeed, even love them. The more we allow contempt to infect our public discourse, the harder it is to fulfill this duty. Cultivating and expressing moral faith in people, however challenging we find it, is our best defense against the destructive effects of contempt.²⁴

²⁴ Various ideas that show up in this paper have been presented at the Pacific Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association, the Baylor-Georgetown-Notre Dame conference on philosophy of religion, Auburn University, Johns Hopkins University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. I am grateful to those audiences for their helpful comments and challenges.